

Mulid!

C a r n i v a l s o f F a i t h



Photographs by
Sherif Sonbol

Text by
Tarek Atia

Mulid!

Carnivals of Faith



Mulid!

C a r n i v a l s o f F a i t h

Photographs by
Sherif Sonbol

Text by
Tarek Atia

The American University in Cairo Press

*For
Samia and Inas
Omar and Hannah*

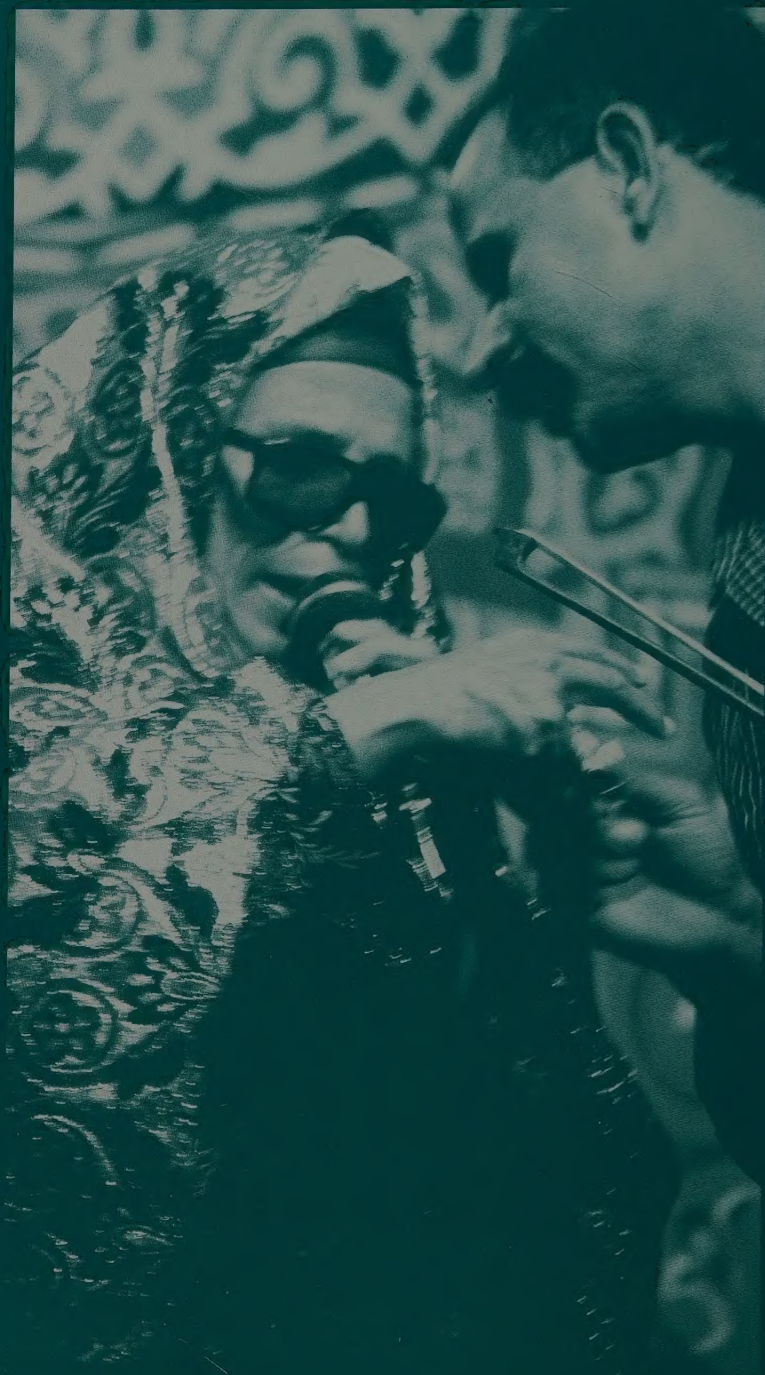
*Copyright © 1999 by
The American University in Cairo Press
113 Sharia Kasr el Aini
Cairo, Egypt
<http://aucpress.com>*

*All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any
means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or
otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.*

Designed by Creative Culture, Inc.

*Dar el Kutub No. 2371/99
ISBN 977 424 519 9*

Printed in Egypt



Contents

6 Acknowledgments

7 The World in a Carnival

11 Mulid!

78 Mulid Stars

94 Some Favorite Mulids

96 Sources

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Al-Ahram Weekly, its chief editor Hosny Guindy, and managing editor Hani Shukrallah for their continuing support and encouragement.

*Thanks too to those who took part in the mulid adventures:
Hala Saad, Medhat Badie, Nagih Nassif, Nasr Tewfik, Onsy Hamdy, Sameh
Phillipe, Samia Fakhry, Sherine Nasr, Warren Littrell, Wassim Kamal,
Sameh Abdallah, and Tasha.*

*Many thanks also go to Hajj Abdel-Shafie, Mustafa Gouverneur,
Mohamed Hamam, Mohamed El-Assiouty, Ayman Sami,
Ahmad Fahim, William Kopycki, Youssef Rakha, and Omar Atia
for the long hours of discussion and debate.*

The World in a Carnival

The mulid is often mistakenly labeled a Muslim religious event. It is actually more of a cultural phenomenon, a community ritual that has been continuously practiced in Egypt since pharaonic times. There is evidence that the concept of a pilgrimage to the shrine and tomb of a revered figure dates all the way back to mass pilgrimages to the temples of Osiris in ancient Egypt. It is a practice held onto and modified by Christians and Muslims over the course of time.

Mulid-goers will tell you that some sort of *baraka*, or blessing, can be found at the tombs of holy men, and that this *baraka* is infectious and can transform the lives of anyone who comes near it. Many pious and educated Muslims, on the other hand, see mulids as mass repression releases, solid examples of backwardness, and sacrilegious celebrations. The idea of patron shaykhs is foreign to mainstream, moderate Islam, whose precepts teach that there is no need for an intermediary, such as a saint or a priest, between human beings and God.

Perhaps this is why mulid apologists try to argue that more than being dedicated to the patron shaykh, the mulid is about constant rhythms, about thanking God year after year for the grace of life, about celebrating your place in the world no matter how miserable it might be, about rich neighbors helping the neighborhood poor to loosen up and celebrate for a few days.

I grew up in an Egyptian, Muslim household in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. Every year at the appointed time, we celebrated Mulid al-Nabi, in commemoration of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him, along with a few dozen other families of Middle Eastern and South Asian descent, at our 'Sunday School,' a public high school we rented once a week. Mulid al-Nabi was held in the high school's cafeteria, where we listened to a speech or two, prayed together, then dug into a pot luck lunch with the inevitably too-spicy Pakistani dish. In fact, the spiciest thing about those mulids was always the curry.

Many years later I went to my first Mulid al-Nabi celebration in Egypt, where I saw things that stunned me. Flutes and drums and horses and processions. Snake charmers and trance sessions that lasted deep into the night. I saw an entire village out of the house, reveling in the streets. Dozens of men sitting, dancing, swaying, or singing. The *mizmar*, an oboe-like pipe, continuously blaring its provocative notes, accompanied by *tabla*, *rababa*, and *nayy*. The loudspeakers competing to send these sounds of drum, fiddle, and flute everywhere you turn. Trains of screaming children, hands on each others' shoulders, jostling their way through the crowd. Everywhere I turned something was being sold—shiny, pointed, silver party hats, olives and every other kind of food, entrance into a magic show featuring talking snakes and Red Sea mermaids, a merry-go-round, and flying swings

I began attending mulids as often as I could. I went to all the big ones in Cairo: Sayyida Zaynab, al-Husayn, Fatma al-Nabawiya. I checked out small-town mulids like al-Manashi and Sidi Abu al-Ghayt, both in Qalyubiya. And I visited the shaykhs' tombs all across the Delta, including the biggest and most important, Ahmad al-Badawi in Tanta and Ibrahim al-Disuqi in Disuq. My interest stemmed from my sheer surprise and immersion in a world completely different from my own. And not only because I had been brought up in the States, I discovered. Many people I met once I moved to Cairo had no direct experience of a mulid, none at all. They knew what a mulid was, of course, but that idea came from a secondhand source like a movie or, in recent years, a commercial. The reason is obvious: mulids are not as common in a constantly and rapidly expanding Cairo as they used to be a hundred years ago or more. Urbanites and suburbanites rarely find themselves in the midst of a mulid any more. Only residents of the poorer, older quarters, in the crowded alleyways of Sayyida Zaynab, al-Darb al-Ahmar, and al-Husayn, still celebrate this way. The shaykhs' feasts that dot the average Egyptian's social calendar remain a mystery to wealthier, more modernized citizens of this ancient land, as well as to a growing number of urban and rural Muslims who have come to understand that such celebrations actually go against the grain of the religion.

Nearly every village in Egypt has a patron shaykh, usually a figure around whom a legendary tale is told, and an even more legendary mulid is held for a few days each year. The pilgrims, sellers, and revelers come from all over. They set up camp in the alleys, huddled up with blankets, *shishas*, and tea, to have impromptu reunions with friends and relatives who live in other parts of the country or who have migrated to Cairo.

Although the mulid may seem like a chaotic, random event, it is actually a rather strictly organized affair. The different activities build up over anything from one to three or four days to *al-layla al-kabira*, the 'Big Night.' On the nights prior to the Big Night, each *tariqa*, or Sufi order, holds a *zikr*, wherein the adherents sway and chant religiously, sometimes reaching a trance-like state. On the day of the Big Night, a grand *zaffa*, or procession, takes place, which in certain mulids is led by the *khalifa*, a symbolic personality who represents a descendant of the shaykh being honored. Up until a few decades ago, some *zaffas* included a *dosa*, when the *khalifa* rode his horse over the backs of tens—sometimes hundreds—of devotees lying prone in a line on the ground.

These days, only the naive world still operates on simple mechanisms of entertainment like the mulid. The rest of humanity depends on the likes of monster truck shows, pro wrestling, Walt Disney, and the million-dollar 'magic' of the movies.

But just as urban development, industrialization, and increased educational opportunities have already removed the mulid from the consciousness of a significant segment of society over the past century, one wonders whether these tales and mass outpourings will become obsolete in the face of the information revolution and an even more commercialized populace? Will they become mere ceremonial parodies of themselves as the next generation becomes more 'story-savvy' thanks to satellite TV? In fact, this book—a gathering together of photographs from many different mulids and descriptions of mulids by prominent authors—is part of the historical shift from mulid as pure reality to mulid as icon.

"Why are you photographing us—to show the world how backward we are?" a younger resident of Abu al-Ghayt asked me while we were at the small-town mulid. It was too loud to continue the conversation, but I imagine these were the thoughts going through both our minds—mine, as the observer, and his, as the observed: That the modern world has put everyone in a dilemma. Old is supposed to be bad, but then what to do with all those old traditions? Can we continue to live them, somehow unaffected by the specter that they are a throwback to a less developed, more primitive, 'backward' past ?

At every mulid I have been to the people always complain that there was going to be no mulid this year, but then so-and-so saw shaykh so-and-so (the patron shaykh) in a dream, who said they had to have the mulid. Or so-and-so said "I'm not going to the mulid this year,"

then something bad happened to him or her and they changed their mind. These are either the warning cries of perpetual extinction or just the same old stories that are always told to make the mulid seem more magical and necessary.

The rich spectrum of virtual alternatives to the grit of real life is playing a part in transforming the history of the mulid and its place in society. But celluloid, literature, and music can never really provide a true representation of a mulid. In fact, nothing can prepare you for the experience. It can be described as nothing less than a total release—but of course it cannot be described. The exact time and place do not matter—it is the mayhem and glorious order of it that really count. The inexplicable outpouring of activity and emotion that can never be summed up in two dimensions. The hypnotic whirl of the trance-dancers, the throng continuously moving in every direction at once, the blaring speakers and rows of multicolored lights. It is too much: the streets are packed, the stages are creaking

Although there is no substitute for experiencing the event itself, Sherif Sonbol's photographs come as close as photography can. Over the years he has compiled a tremendous array of images from mulids across Egypt, having chosen the option of looking at the mulid with a detached, sympathetic lens. Sherif was the one who always knew when the mulids were held. He asked around and had a network of mulid contacts among the tea-boys of *Al-Ahram*, the newspaper where we both work. Many of our forays into the world of mulids were journalistic, but sometimes we went just for the fun of it, to remind ourselves of the frenzy and the rhythm, and to keep in touch with good friends we got to know along the way.

The texts I have chosen to accompany the photographs reflect the wide range of opinion in popular literature regarding mulids. They provide a quick glimpse of the mulid's randomness, which is actually the key to its mystery, a mystery that will always remain beyond all the highbrow and lowbrow attempts to chart and crystallize it.

Mulid!

Abdel-Aziz snuggled up to his father and listened to his words of praise. They were obscure words whose mystery the boy could not grasp, but they unlocked in his imagination awesome images of men not like other men. Perhaps they were thin and frail and wore the most tattered garments, but they stood at the four corners of the earth, and when they chose to journey, they covered huge distances with each step. They stretched out their hands and healed the sick. They filled udders with milk and granaries with grain. They lived among the people, and you could not tell them from the others. But when they died their light would break forth, and domed tombs would be built for them in the cities. The streets would be filled with people, like armies of ants, carrying their provisions to the feasts of these saints.

Abdel-Hakim Kassem

The Seven Days of Man



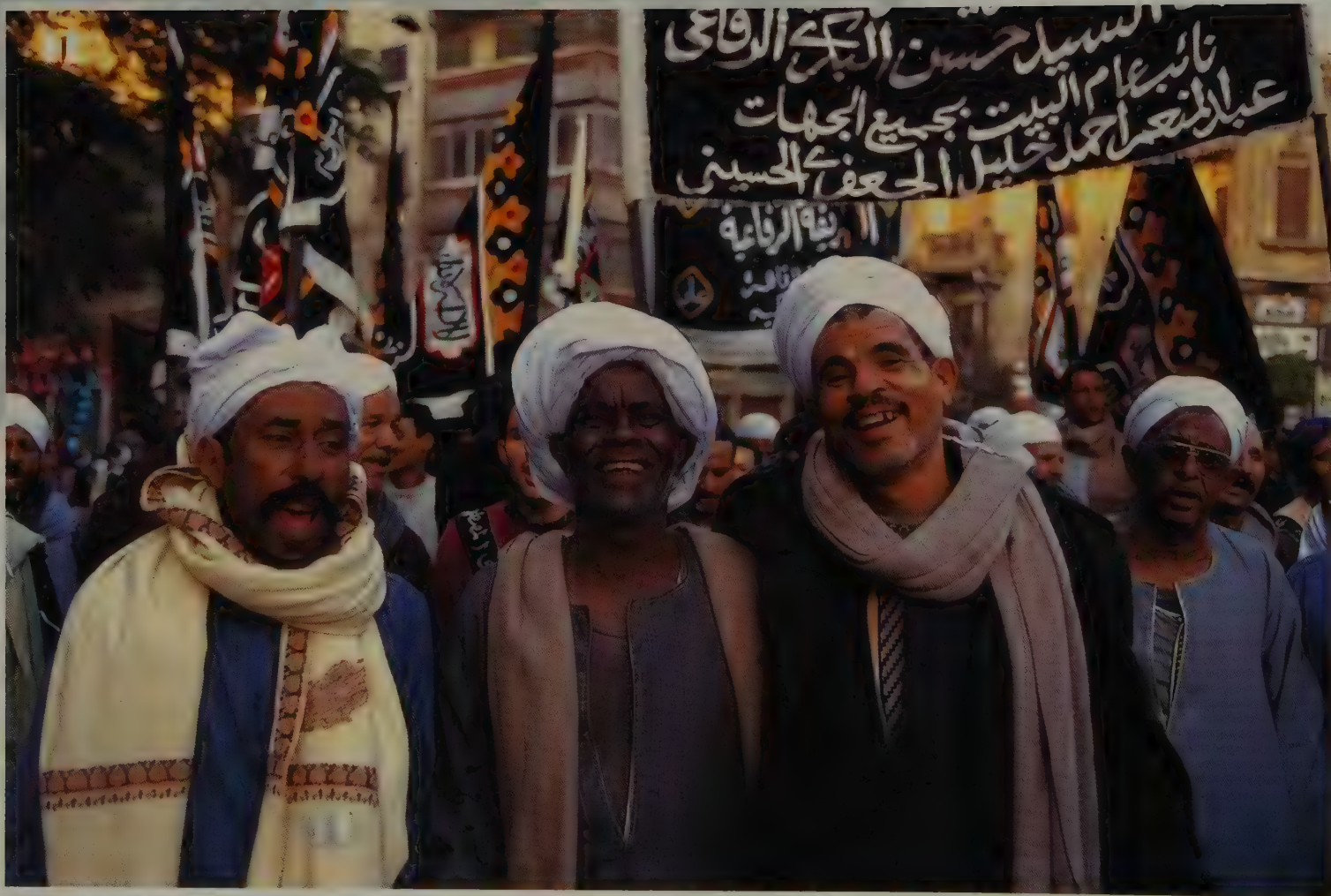
The zaffa procession of Sidi Abu al-Haggag al-Uqsuri in Luxor



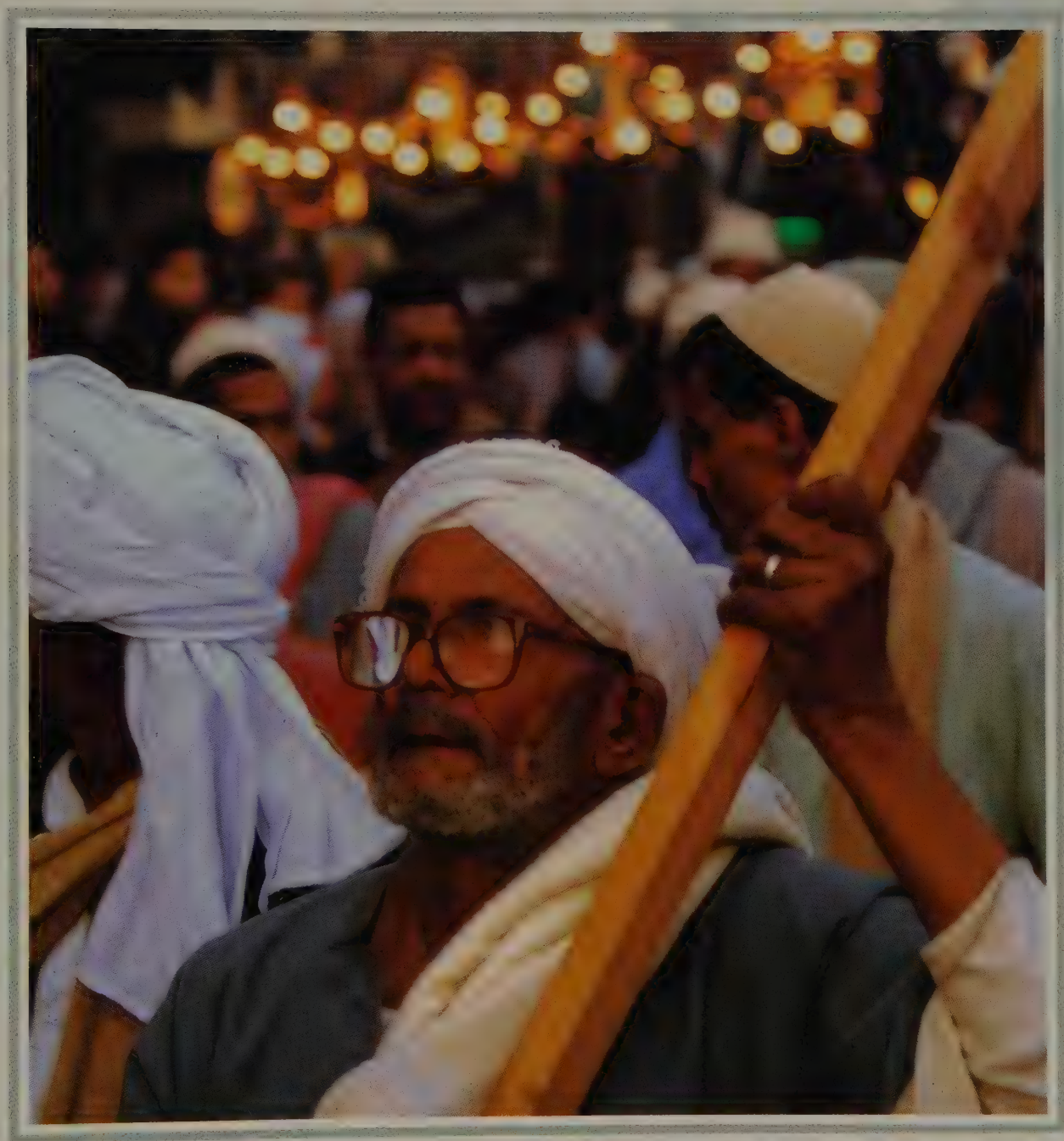
The *zaffa* of al-Adra (The Virgin Mary) in Durunka, Asyut



A woman brings her baby to the mulid of al-Rifai, Cairo



Participants in the al-Rifai zaffa



Bearing the banner of one of the Sufi *tariqas*, or ways

Khudaira, however, never left her place, for with each station the number of passengers increased and she was afraid of losing her seat: it was pilgrimage time and there were many travellers. Packed together, flesh to flesh, some were seated in the corridors, some on the carriage floor. Oh, if only she had had the time she too would have made the pilgrimage to Kerbela and been blessed by touching the dust covering the tomb of Holy Hussein! That would indeed have brought grace and blessings! Only last year Faheema al-Alwan had gone on the pilgrimage and everyone in the village had turned out to welcome her back, the women touching the train of her dress and kissing her hands and feet for good luck. Oh, if only she too could be so honoured, so favoured! It was indeed a great blessing to make a pilgrimage to the Lord of Martyrs and be blessed by the dust of his tomb! What rare fortune that would be! Allahu Akbar. Allahu Akbar. Allahu Akbar.

Abdel Malik Nouri
"The South Wind"



Mulid of al-Rifai, Cairo



Mulid of al-Rifai, Cairo



Mulid of al-Rifai, Cairo



Mulid of al-Rifai, Cairo



Inside the mosque of Ahmad al-Badawi in Tanta on the Big Night (*al-layla al-kabira*)

My next artistic experience took a different form, namely the mulid of Sidi Ibrahim al-Disuqi, including the procession which passed under our windows, starting with the khalifa on horseback and with drawn sword, surrounded by multi-colored banners, flags, pennants, and standards, by big drums and pipes of all sizes, and followed by a large number of carts drawn by animals of all kinds—horses and mules and donkeys and cows and water buffaloes and bulls—each cart representing a particular trade with all its appurtenances and with members of the guild on it: the blacksmiths had a forge and an anvil which they beat with their hammers to exemplify their work, then would come the carpenters with their saws, the masons with their trowels, the potters with their water pots and jugs, the tinsmiths with their mugs and Ramadan lanterns—each acting his part in daily life; even the fruit merchants had their cart, on which they had set up tree branches with apples and oranges hanging on them. It was a kind of unsophisticated carnival, but the impression it left on me at that age was wonderful, indescribable.

Tawfiq al-Hakim
The Prison of Life



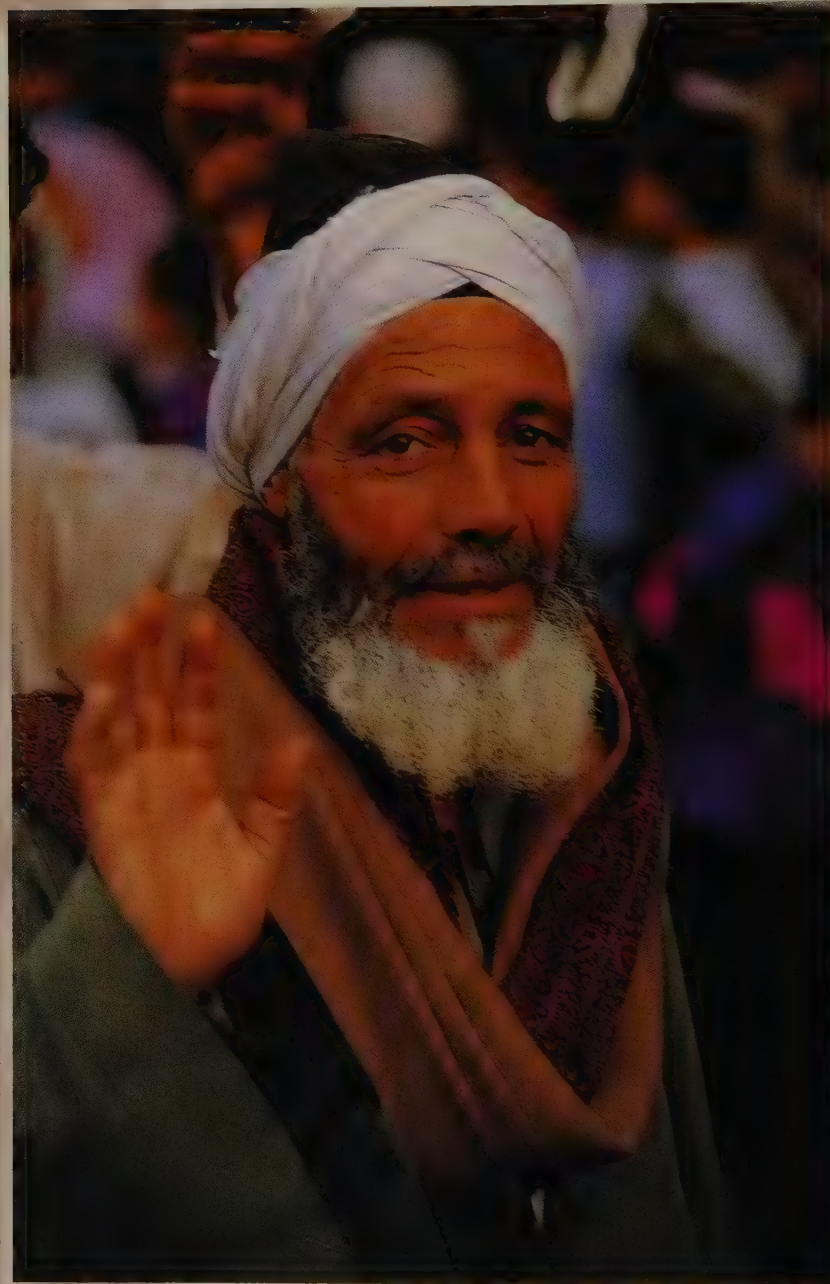
The *zaffa* of Ahmad al-Rifai, Cairo; the man on the horse is the *khalifa*, or descendant, of the shaykh



The domes and minarets of the Sultan Hasan and al-Rifai mosques near the Citadel in Cairo



One of the two *khalifas* of Ahmad al-Badawi, Tanta; the cap and cloak actually belonged to the shaykh



A visitor to the mulid of Sidi Ibrahim al-Disuqi, Disuq



Approaching the doorway of the mosque of al-Rifai, Cairo; the *khalifa* goes in first, then the crowds follow

A saint's feast day seemed to be in progress, to judge from the crowds in the square, the peddlers, lunatics, dervishes and entertainers, even though the real action of the feast would not start until sundown.

Naguib Mahfouz
Children of the Alley



Mulid of al-Rifai, Cairo



A mulid visitor volunteers to spray water on the streets



Mulid of al-Rifai, Cairo



The procession of craftsmen at the *zaffa*
of Sidi Abu al-Haggag al-Uqsuri in Luxor



It costs one Egyptian pound to watch the motorcycle daredevil,
who has been entertaining at mulids across the country for fifty years

After that [Mahrousa] went into 'manufacturing' . . . She started picking up any discarded paper she could find on the street, thrown out by import-export dealers, and used them to make clowns' hats and paper fans. She fixed these onto sticks made from stripped palm branches, used to make cages, which had ended up on the rubbish dump in the market. She stuck the hats and fans onto the sticks with starch made from cooked rice then, in order to paint them, she boiled up left-over vegetables and scraps to make dyes which were brightly coloured to attract children. Then, in this attempt to stave off destitution, she roamed the markets and saints' day festivals, selling her wares for a few pennies.

Salwa Bakr
The Golden Chariot



Hats and trinkets for sale at al-Sayyid al-Badawi, Tanta



The clown performs his tricks for one Egyptian pound at the mulid of Sayyida Zaynab; he is part of a repertoire of performers, including the magician, the flying lady, and the lady with no body, who travel to all the different mulids



The shooting gallery is one of the standard mulid events;
if you hit the target you get a prize, traditionally a piece of Turkish delight



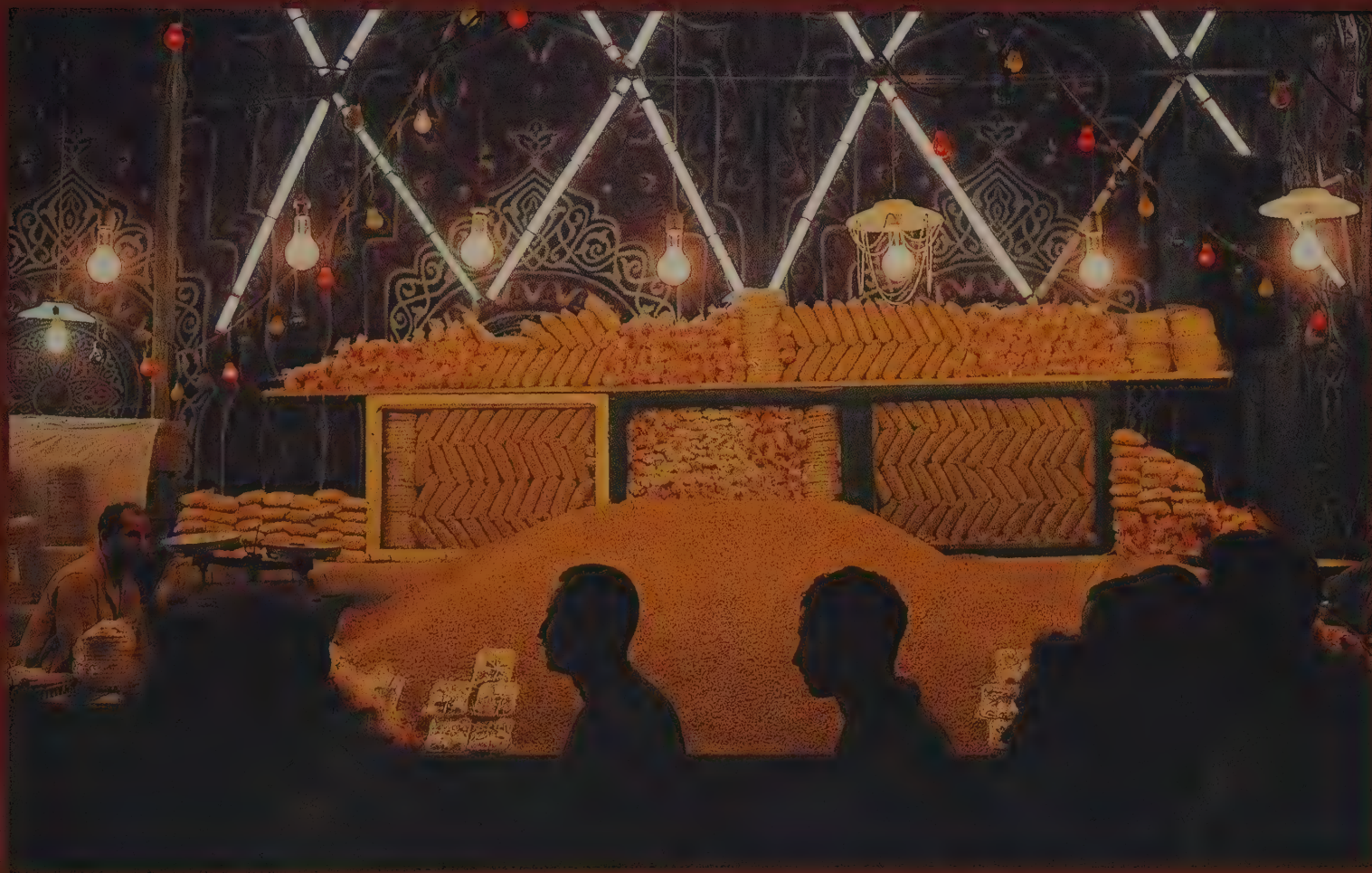
Children, including the photographer's daughter Hannah, playing at a mulid



Selling soda pop on the big day at Sayyida Aisha's mulid in Cairo

Hummus, hummus, a hill that never shrinks,
As it roasts it dances,
Dances, dances, dances, and says,
"Seeing hummus without eating it
Is like struggling with love and ending up alone."

Salah Jahin
al-Layla al-kabira operetta



Roasted hummus (chick-peas) for sale at the mulid of Sayyida Zaynab, Cairo



The most famous mulid couple; they set up their shishas and serve tea to visitors at every mulid



A family discussion at the al-Rifai mulid, Cairo



Preparing the food that will be served free of charge to the poor



A rather efficient way to make more tea with just one burner

The zikr became a mad frenzy. Mohammed Kamel in the middle, swaying and clapping his hands loudly above him, set a fast, feverish rhythm. Sanhouti breathed a maniacal spirit into his flute. . . . The pounding of the men's feet on the ground seemed to shake the whole village. The two rows of bodies were drenched with sweat. They leaned together, twisted together, and came up together. They fell and rose together in one convulsive sequence. . . . There was nothing left in the world but the sound of the tambourine and the flute It was an overpowering noise that crushed the hardness in every heart.

Abdel-Hakim Kassem

The Seven Days of Man



Zikir at the Sayyida Zaynab mulid in Cairo



Ecstasy at the *zikh*



Zikr at the mulid of Sayyida Zaynab, Cairo



Ecstasy at the *zikr*



Mulid of Sayyida Zaynab, Cairo

Azima also began to participate in the Saints' day festivals with religious poems and poems of praise which were well received and broadcast with the help of modern technology—namely the microphone—capable of giving strength, magic and brilliance to weak voices. . . . She strove to produce a voice, strengthened by electronic means, which was as powerful as possible, taking advantage of the hoarseness which followed from long years of being a professional mourner and which won her the amazement of all who gathered to listen to her during the festivals. . . . Hardly a year had passed before Azima had her own music group to accompany her during the nights of the famous Saints' days of Cairo like Hussein and Sayyida Zaynab and Sayyid El-Badawi in Tanta. Her repertoire had expanded as she responded to her increased popularity. . . . In this way she followed in the footsteps of all the popular eulogists who emulated the greatest and most erudite Sufis of the Middle Ages.

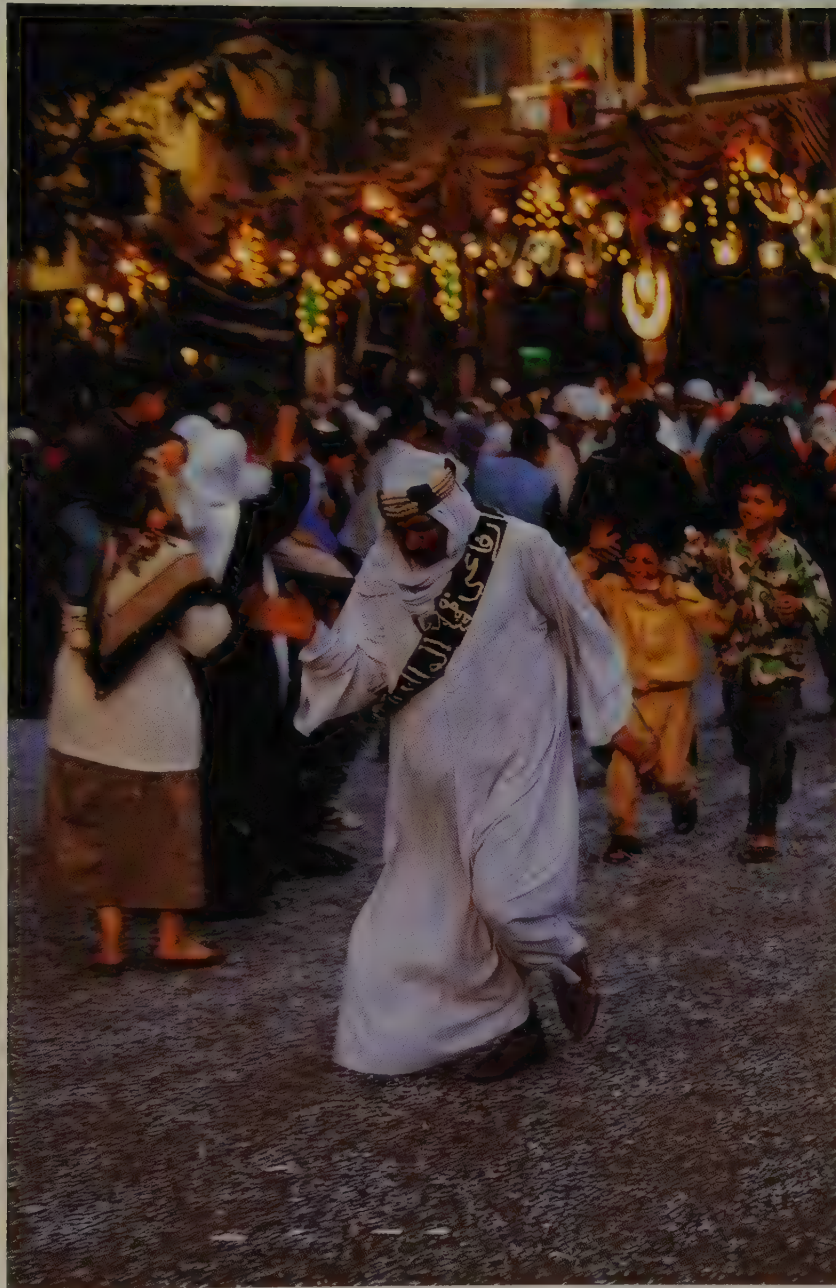
Salwa Bakr
The Golden Chariot



Singing Sufi love songs of Umm Kulthum at the mulid
of Sayyida Zaynab, Cairo



aThe al-Rifai *zaffa* is the longest in the country, proceeding along main roads with police escort from the mosque of Sayyida Zaynab to al-Rifai



A man dances amid the rice that has been thrown onto the ground by local residents for good luck at the mulid of al-Rifai, Cairo



A drummer in the Mulid al-Nabi *zaffa* at a village near Cairo



A happy man playing the cymbals during the al-Rifai zaffa, Cairo

Most of the Egyptians not only expect a blessing to follow their visiting the tomb of a celebrated saint, but they also dread that some misfortune will befall them if they neglect this act. Thus, while I am writing these lines, an acquaintance of mine is suffering from an illness which he attributes to his having neglected, for the last two years, to attend the festivals of the seyyid Ahmad El-Bedawee, at Tanta; this being the period of one of these festivals.

E.W. Lane

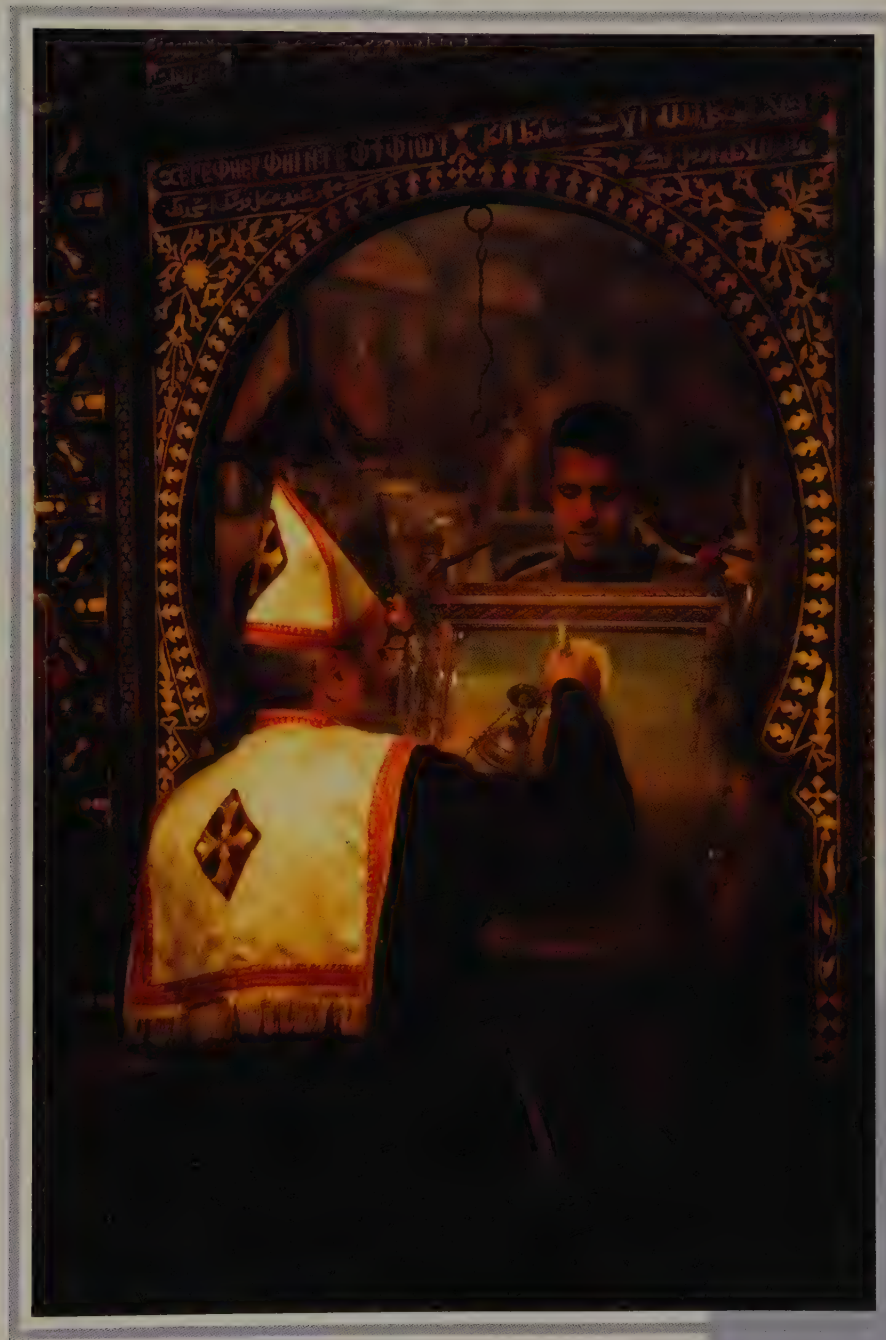
The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians



Quiet time at the tomb of Sidi Abu al-Magd in the Delta



The procession of craftsmen at the mulid of Abu al-Haggag al-Uqsuri in front of Luxor Temple



Saint Marina mulid in Harat al-Rum, Cairo



Muslim visitors at a coffee house at the mulid of the Virgin Mary at Durunka, Asyut;
at mulids Muslims and Copts gather together irrespective of religion



A Sudanese woman at the mulid of Abd al-Rahim al-Qinawi in Qina

I went back to the square after visiting the shrine of al-Husayn. I saw a crowd staring at a dancer and a man playing a pipe. The piper was making music and the dancer was swaying and playing with a stick, while the people clapped and faces shone with rapturous happiness. I thought angrily of ways I could disperse the gathering, but in a moment of light I saw all of them in God's good time, as they hurried toward the grave. It was as though they were racing one another, until not one of them remained. At that I turned my back on them and went off.

Naguib Mahfouz
Echoes of an Autobiography



The *tahtib* dance with sticks, mulid of Sayyida Zaynab, Cairo



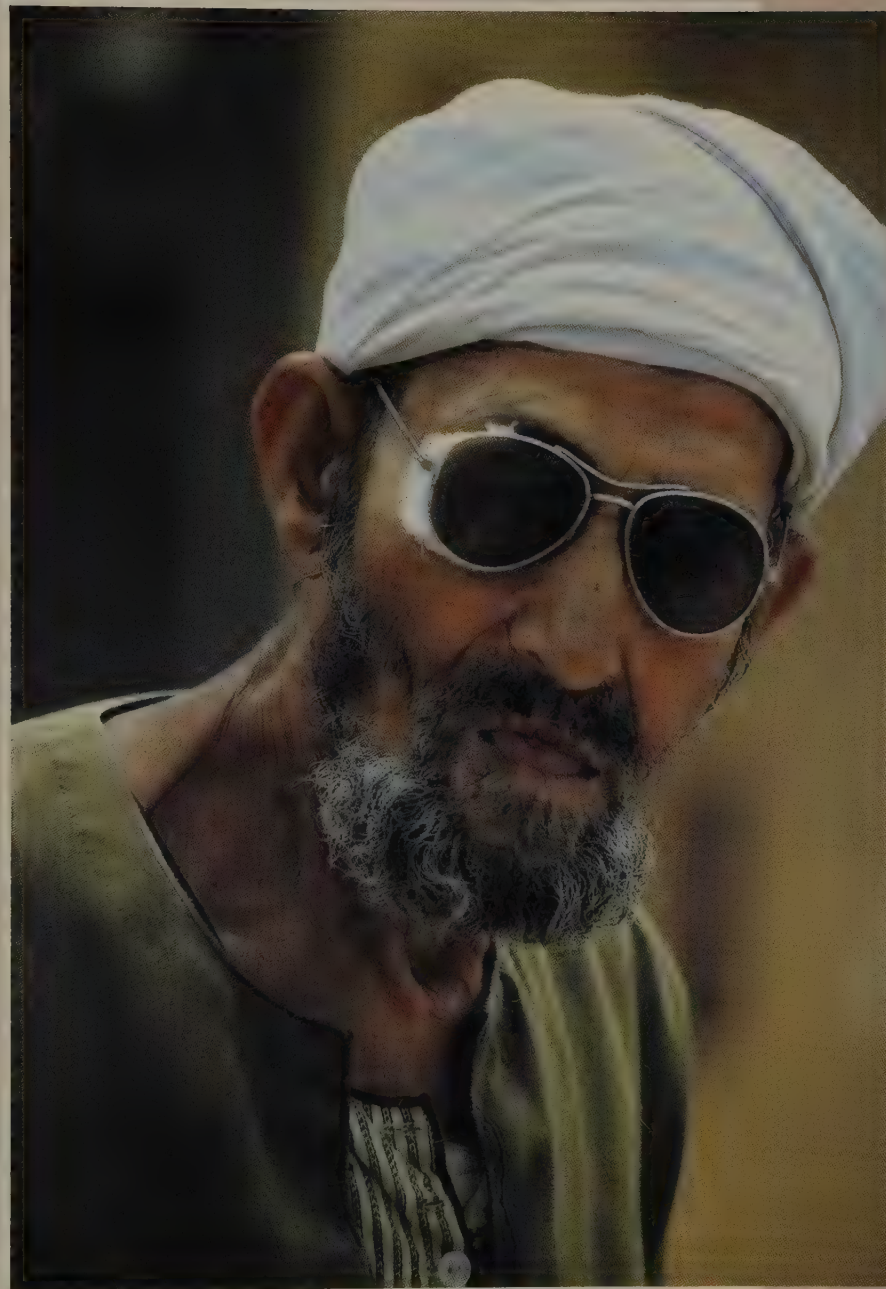
Two men playing the *mizmar* in accompaniment to the *tahtib* dance



A decorated antique rifle becomes part of the al-Rifai *zaffa*



"Look at the picture of me with my goose," says this regular visitor to mulids



Visiting the mulid of Sayyida Zaynab in Cairo
to ask for blessings for a wounded eye

Our cherished shaykh's dome,
When they light it up: there's nothing lovelier
Than the lanterns and the people visiting it.
There's nothing lovelier than the lanterns when they light them,
And our cherished shaykh's dome that's high in the air.

Salah Jahin
al-Layla al-kabira operetta



The amazing lights on the domes and minarets of Sayyida Zaynab's mosque on the Big Night (*al-layla al-kabira*)



A woman brings her baby to the mulid of Mari Girgis in Luxor



The oil from the lantern of many saints' tombs
is thought to have healing powers



Buying and selling costume jewelry at Ibrahim al-Disuqi's mulid



The zaffa of Ahmad al-Rifai, Cairo

Mulids stars

Sayyid al-Dawi has probably told more stories than any other man on the planet. The verses in his head outnumber all those written by Walt Whitman, Ahmad Shawqi, and a dozen other poets from a dozen other nations combined. If Sayyid al-Dawi were to tell every story he knows, one after the other, without stopping, it might take six months or more.

These are neither exaggerations nor random figures. The stories Sayyid tells are all part of one gigantic story, an epic poem of a million lines or more.

Al-Sira al-Hilaliya is the tale of a folk hero's endless exploits and escapades. These stories of Abu Zayd al-Hilali, a conqueror of conquerors, renowned in villages from Tunis to Iran, have been recounted at coffeehouses, weddings, circumcisions, and especially mulids for centuries.

These days, Abu Zayd's audience has shifted into the realms provided by urban cultural centers the world over. Sayyid al-Dawi was in Paris recently, recounting the Sira to a packed house in the amphitheater at the Cité de la Musique. During the trip he was profiled in *Libération*; the writer compared him to a Greek relative of Homer's who could recite the *Illiad* or *Odyssey* by heart.

Sayyid slips into the Sira like it's a second skin. He speaks the verse not as mere memorized lines that could be about someone else, but as if it were his own story—as if he, or one of his ancestors, had watched or participated in every twist and turn. He sings, speaks, and chants, slowing down, speeding up, raising his voice, then addressing the audience in a conspiratorial whisper, as though letting us in on some secret meaning . . . then the sudden, emphasized sentence or phrase. "Healing for hearts!" he might explode, repeating the phrase several times, his voice undulating in tandem with the rababa he is softly bowing.

Every story must start with a blessing for the Prophet. It is Sayyid's favorite part of the job, and a clear remedy for any ailment. "If I don't start with a fifteen-minute blessing, I cannot tell the story," he says. "The blessing is the key to the usefulness of it all."



Mulid stars

All his life, he's been Mister Entertainment. "I'll do all that for you," Muhammad Karima says, referring to all the other performers who traditionally accompany the puppeteer during mulids: the fire-eater, the magician, the man who can make you levitate. He has never tried any of these tricks for real but remains fully confident he could do any one of them, because he has always been there, he knows all the secrets, he is part of the inside crowd.

During his show, Muhammad is tucked away beneath the curtain, within the comfort of the box, away from the eager eyes of the audience. In real life, he is a loner, and his home is a cave, the perfect place to retreat into the belly of the family, where you don't have to say much. He lives with his sisters and a scattering of relatives, distant and near.

He speaks of the old days when Bulaq was just a bunch of thatched huts, when the area behind the Mugamma downtown teemed with street performers, making it sound like a fairy tale. It is where he met his wife—they were both part of a bohemian, down-and-out crowd of artisans and performers—and they eloped, anxious to consummate their marriage. They went to a small village called Biba for their honeymoon and within three days he had set up his stage from their vacation window and put on a show for the locals.

Things are not as simple as before—he is, after all, a salt-of-the-earth puppeteer, the last vestige of a world before radio and television. His entire life still revolves around the puppets: their repertoire, their upkeep, their performance.

For the second part of his act, he makes a larger marionette dressed as a bride belly-dance to the sounds of Warda and Amr Diab. It is the high point of the performance. The slightest, deft movements of fingers and wrist and she swings her hips more seductively than Fifi Abdu.

After lunch, Muhammad cradles the doll, petting her hair and talking to her as though she was his daughter.



Mulid stars

Al-Ghuri Palace is the home of the tannura whirling dervishes, a highly talented troupe of musicians and dancers who try to reproduce the aura and spirit of a mulid for a wider audience. Night after night, Bunduq and Annous whirl themselves and their audience into a world where gravity and the laws of physics no longer matter, where the entire world is, in fact, concentrated in the physical act of a man spinning counterclockwise around his own axis.

Bunduq and Annous are guaranteed crowd-pleasers. How could you not feel ecstatic—or at least stupefied—while watching a man spin 120 times a minute, bright rainbow skirts flying around him like waves, not two meters from where you sit? It would be impossible not to wonder how he can spin for so long without getting dizzy.

Bunduq's serious demeanor as he tells the story of his life makes the tale seem like it has become legend in his own mind: how he grew up on al-Muizz li-Din Allah Street, how he used to travel to mulids with his 'whirling' father and in the process met a dervish called al-Attar, who took the performance to new levels. Soon, Bunduq was practicing with a blanket at home, innovating on the tannura his father taught him, adding features of his own that he picked up from staring at old buildings, from spending a lot of time in dark places. He began trying to imitate nature in his dance—the birds, dew drops, the movement of the water in the Nile. People started talking about him; he began getting more offers to perform than his father. "I had made a good name for myself in the business," he says.

The business?

"I'm not in this for the money," he asserts. "If I was I'd have been out of here a long time ago. No, I do this for God, for the people who come to watch. Were you here last night? The tourists mobbed me and they were all crying, they said they were crying for me . . ."



Mulid stars

Annous's spinning is pure entertainment. He does things Bunduq—who claims to be a Sufi—would (could) never do, like lifting the skirts over his head with two sticks until he looks like a gigantic spinning multi-colored mulid lantern. Annous did not inherit his trade—he learned it from a local shaykh, a man who lived near him in Zawya al-Hamra. Although he would never consider himself a Sufi, as practice when he was growing up Annous used to perform at local mulids and zars. His desire to spin is an illness he does not want to cure.

Although performing Sufi rituals without the proper spiritual bent is supposedly a bad idea, Annous is not worried. He believes that God has given him this gift, and that as long as he remains modest things will be okay.

During his performance, Annous is on another planet altogether, an unidentified flying saucer. He spins with an obvious step and push on each turn, but his skirts hide a great big bag of tricks. In an instant Annous can become a gigantic lantern and whirling yo-yo, or else, skirt balanced on his head, a roulette wheel, or a top spinning at the speed of sound.

The drummers continue their skyrocket into the upper stratospheres of beat, and Annous arrives at the attention-grabbing solo—strutting around he spins the skirt above his head with one hand, a psychedelic pizza-tosser doing gymnastics in an ancient palace, truly performing for the crowd. The spinning skirt comes so close that a woman in the front row gasps and ducks.

The beats become more staccato, and all of a sudden Annous, while continuing to spin, tosses the spinning skirt into the air before gathering it all together in a cloud of dust as the music stops.

It is that final, over-the-top push that does it, makes the crowd go crazy—it is like they have just seen the main attraction at the circus.



Mulid stars

The Sufi sword and skewer tricksters who used to thrive at mulids across the country are few and far between these days.

The performers were mechanics, electricians, sheet metal dealers, who had learned the tricks from their fathers. Everything in the Sufi order was inheritance. Most shaykhs had been given the covenant long ago by their elders. "From our grandfathers' grandfathers," they all said.

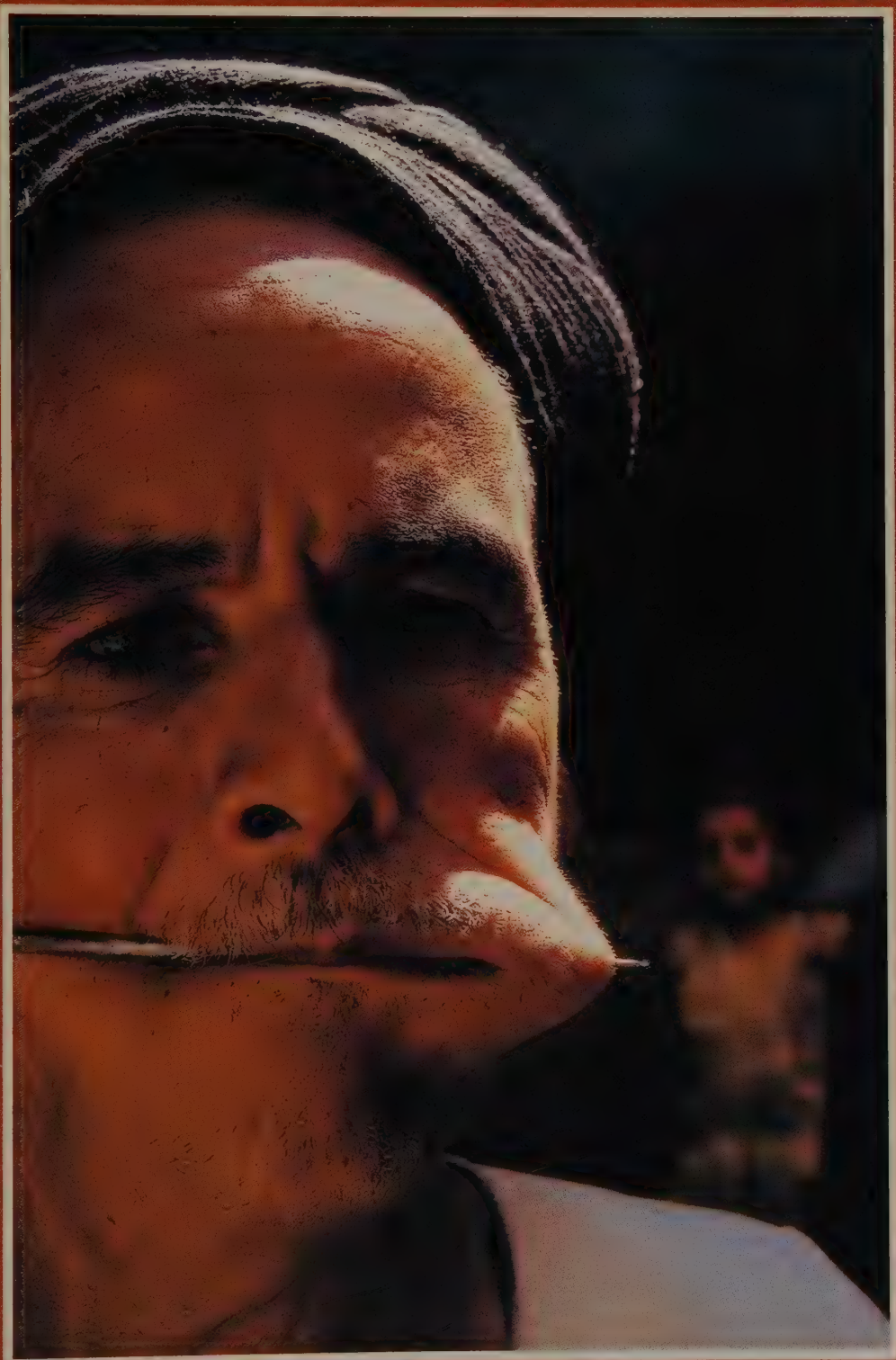
The al-Rifai rites cannot help but sound exotic to the uninitiated. But almost anyone who grew up in lower- to middle-class Cairo, the Delta, or any village remembers seeing or hearing about strange men who go to mulids with their snakes and sharp object displays.

Sticking gigantic skewers from the inside of their mouths straight through to the other side without drawing a single drop of blood is just one of the many feats that can be performed by the true followers of Ahmad al-Rifai, the Sufi shaykh of the Rifai sect. The Rifais believe in the impenetrability of the human body when graced with the spirit of God. They eat glass, stick swords into their bodies, charm snakes, and are stepped on by horses, all without pain or bruises.

But these days the Sufis are being prevented by official and non-official religious organizations from doing the things they have been doing unhindered for years—zaffas, dosas, snake-charming, insect-eating. They are accused of tarnishing the image of Islam.

Do they? Older and younger dervishes claim that once a dervish tries to exhibit his talent for the mere sake of exhibition he breaks the covenant with God. He who does it for money is morally soiled; his ability to do the tricks decreases. He may bleed, for instance, while sticking the skewer through his cheek.

It is those few but garish charlatans who stake a claim at every mulid and charge money for tricks that have spoiled it for the rest of the Sufis.



We pile into a microbus on a quiet Delta road at just past sunrise, and full-bodied, wide-faced, gold-toothed, big-smiled Rabha tells stories the whole way to the first shaykh's tomb. Of her brother dying in an old-style septic tank. While digging, he went deeper than he should have, to where the spirits live, and they killed him.

That's the moment the spirits first took hold of her. She covered her brother's body with her long, long hair. Afterward, they put her in a room with henna on the walls, and she stayed there for weeks, unable to eat or move.

The walls started to open up—then, suddenly, al-Sayyida Nafisa was there. She asked Rabha what she wanted, but Rabha screamed. She was scared.

Rabha's daughter Rahma was born three months premature. She was so tiny they thought she was dead. They did not want to waste their money on a hospital incubator, so her father took a blanket from the hospital and brought the tiny baby home. They did not know what to do with her, and were about to bury her when Rahma made a sound, "Mmmmmmm." She survived, became something of a super-baby. At four and a half, she has already fallen off the roof (six stories) twice, and been run over by a lorry, and survived.



Rabha and Arnaba go shopping for a while, then we visit the shaykh's tomb and wipe the sweat from our chests onto the stone where locals claim the Prophet had once rested his palm (It cures all ailments, says Abu Ibrahim). Rabha's pretty teenage daughter Hind slides her back against the small marble curve of the wall seven times. Cures a bad back, she says. Do you have a bad back, I ask? No, she giggles, then we pile back into the microbus.

Hind dreams of marriage—she is already engaged, but to a baltagi, a tough guy who does not want to work. She is planning to leave him if something better comes along. Before we leave Tanta, I catch her standing in front of Fayruz Center staring starry-eyed at the wedding dresses on display.

Around sunset, just before we get back home, total mayhem breaks out in the microbus. Shaykh Ahmad has been playing the song "Bi-khtisar" over and over again, and Hind insists he stop the bus—she has the sudden urge to belly-dance in the fields. Rabha ties a belt around her daughter's waist and urges us all to clap along.

A sacrilege on such a spiritual outing? It's all a matter of perspective. After all, the purple light surrounding us was divine.



Arnaba might be considered the tour group leader. Her husband Abu Ibrahim is a butcher, semi-retired, at Madbah Zanhum. We stop in front of the mosque of Ibrahim al-Disuqi, in Disuq, near Kafr al-Shaykh, and lay our mats down in the garden courtyard outside (the largest in Egypt, says Shaykh Ahmad the microbus driver). People come by to pick up their pre-packaged rice-and-meat sandwiches. Arnaba has brought along about two dozen to give to the poor.

Sidi Abu al-Magd, Disuqi's father's tomb, is a lot smaller. The mosque itself is at the corner of a sleepy little village by the Nile. The pilgrims are well known here, too: they come practically every week. Abu Ibrahim bathes here regularly, because Sidi Abu al-Magd cures all ills. "Five doctors in Cairo saw him," says Arnaba, "They all said it was hopeless. They told me to wash his clothes separate from mine and Ibrahim's, not to sleep with him, and so on. Then he came here, took a bath, and was cured."

"He's in the swimming pool," says Arnaba with a smile when someone asks about her husband.

Arnaba looks wistful as she describes the six minibuses they rode in last time. Today, with all the gas and food and handouts, she might take a loss, but then there is always the blessings of the shaykhs—and next week.



Some Favorite Mulids

It is advisable to ask around in advance of any mulid for the exact dates, as the timing depends on a variety of factors and it is hard to predict when any given mulid will be held each year. Approximate dates are given below when possible.

Mulid al-Nabi, everywhere

Since this is a celebration everywhere of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, the mulid has no particular mosque or shaykh's dome attached to it.

Sayyid al-Badawi, Tanta

Ahmad al-Badawi of Tanta is known as Shaykh al-Arab. He was from the Prophet's family, and to this day his descendants don special clothing and ride a horse into the tomb for the mulid. This biggest of all mulids is usually held in October after the crops are sold: it is quite expensive to rent out the lights and the speakers, set up the tents and bring in the singers and musicians. Once this mulid has happened, the other major ones (al-Disuqi in Disuq, al-Qinawi in Qina, and al-Rifai in Cairo) are all held one after the other. The *khalifa* is merely symbolic and not necessarily a true descendant of Ahmad al-Badawi.

Sayyida Zaynab

This is one of Cairo's most crowded and frantic mulids, held around and behind the large mosque in one of the city's most populous and ancient dis-

tricts. The entire district comes alive for three, four, and sometimes five nights. November / December.

Sayyidna al-Husayn, Cairo

What is normally a working-class neighborhood packed with one of the largest concentrations of Islamic antiquities in the world becomes even more crowded during the few days of Sayyidna al-Husayn's mulid every August. This is one that brings together pilgrims from all over the country, with each *tariqa* or group holding its own *zikr* as you wander the narrow alleyways.

Ahmad al-Rifai

This mulid features a lively procession of sword tricksters and snake charmers, who make their way from all over the country to the grand mosque dedicated to their patron shaykh, Ahmad al-Rifai. Although the snakes and other things have decreased with decrees from the Grand Order of Sufi Shaykhs, they are amply covered by musicians and other entertainers. The throngs are led to the entrance of the mosque by a *khalifa* on horseback. This mulid is famous for having the largest *zaffa* parade, which starts at Sayyida Zaynab mosque and ends at al-Rifai mosque, two weeks after Sayyid al-Badawi. This is one of the four main mulids which are led by a *khalifa* on horseback.

Fatma al-Nabawiya, Cairo

This mosque deep in al-Darb al-Ahmar features an intense local mulid every July famed for its spirituality.

Zayn al-Abdin, Cairo

This large, Sufi-drenched mulid usually takes place in late September in the Cairo district of *Madbah* Zanhum. Since the original *madbah*, or slaughterhouse of Zanhum, was transferred to the outskirts of the city, there is even more room for the mulid. Just across the street from a kabab place that has gained much popularity with Cairo's elite, the dedicated begin gathering in the weeks prior to the beginning of the mulid, setting up their tents and banners and sitting quietly in anticipation of the big event.

Abu al-Haggag al-Uqsuri, Luxor

A lot has been written about this mulid, as it seems to be inextricably linked to ancient Egypt. The shaykh's mosque is right in the center of Luxor Temple, and some observers draw parallels between the procession of craftsmen carrying models of their trade and an ancient Egyptian festival held in the same place. Trades represented include the carriage-drivers, the felucca-sailors, and the restaurateurs with their pots and pans. The mulid takes place in the middle of the Islamic month of Shaaban.

Sidi Abu al-Ghayt, Qalyub

A no-holds-barred country mulid, just like the one in Salah Jahin's operetta *al-Layla al-kabira*. You

can just hear the puppeteer giving those crazy directions. Don't worry about getting lost, you always will be, and you'll always be not far from where you were. April.

Mulid al-Adra, Durunka, Asyut

This is the largest Coptic mulid of the year, held at a hillside monastery built over an underground cavern where the Holy Family is supposed to have stayed when they passed through Egypt. Both the Catholic and Orthodox churches in the village near the monastery hold mulids at the same time. Mass baptisms are held in one of the caverns near the monastery, and the mulid is famous for bringing together the village's Christian and Muslim populations for all aspects of the celebration. August.

Mari Girgis (Saint George), Riziqat, Luxor

One of the biggest Coptic mulids, on the west bank of the Nile, a half hour by car south of Luxor. People camp in tents. October.

Mari Girgis, Mit Damsis Bahari (north), Daqahliya

The residents leave town before this August mulid and rent out their properties to the pilgrims. In a large underground church known as the 'hospital,' attached to the Mari Girgis monastery, thousands show up to be exorcised of the spirit riding them. The madness and noise ever-present in the hall suddenly and inexplicably disappear around midnight, when the thousands of pilgrims all simultaneously claim to be cured at the sight of Saint George riding his horse above the crowd.

Sources

Abdel-Hakim Kassem, *The Seven Days of Man*. Translated by Joseph Norment Bell. General Egyptian Book Organization, Cairo, 1989. Pages 13, 64.

Abdel Malik Nouri, "The South Wind," *Modern Arabic Short Stories*. Translated by Denys Johnson-Davies. Heinemann, London, 1967. Pages 118-19.

Tawfiq al-Hakim, *The Prison of Life*. Translated by Pierre Cacchia. The American University in Cairo Press, 1992. Page 55.

Naguib Mahfouz, *Children of the Alley*. Translated by Peter Theroux. Doubleday, New York, 1996. Pages 124-25.

Salwa Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*. Translated by Dinah Manisty. Garnet Publishing, England, 1995. Pages 57-58, 119.

Salah Jahin, *al-Layla al-kabira* operetta.

E.W. Lane, *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. London, 1836.

Naguib Mahfouz, "The Battle," *Echoes of an Autobiography*. Translated by Denys Johnson-Davies. The American University in Cairo Press, 1997. Pages 42-43.



The mulid is a quintessentially Egyptian experience, dating, some say, to early pharaonic times. In villages and cities throughout the country a tomb or shrine is the central pivot of a whirl of color, music, dancing, and people, which builds up to the climactic *layla kabira*, or big night, the last night of the mulid. Colorful crowds, dervishes dancing and chanting, the aroma of fresh food winding through the melee, music, drums, and song—all these propel the visitor into participating in an unforgettable cultural experience that lies at the heart of popular spirituality in Egypt.

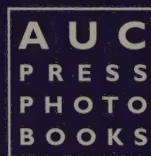
Sherif Sonbol braves the cheerful chaos to bring back remarkable images of the carnival atmosphere, while Tarek Atia introduces the book, explores the mulid in literature, and profiles some of its colorful personalities. Together they create a celebration of both the riotous color and the vivacity of the mulid as well as its more contemplative side.

With extracts from the writings of Abdel-Hakim Kassem, Abdel Malik Nouri, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Naguib Mahfouz, Salwa Bakr, Salah Jahin, and E.W. Lane.

Sherif Sonbol is the official photographer for the Cairo Opera House and has received numerous local and international photography awards.

Tarek Atia is a writer at *Al-Ahram Weekly* newspaper in Cairo, and the recipient of the Med-Media Prize for outstanding journalism.

Front cover: *zikk* at the Sayyida Zaynab mulid in Cairo. Back cover: the al-Rifai *zaffa*.



The American University in Cairo Press

